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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002293

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SUBJECT: AFGHAN ELECTIONS: BASHARDOST, THE POPULIST,  
ANTI-CORRUPTION CANDIDATE

Classified By: PolCouns Annie Pforzheimer, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Presidential candidate and MP Ramazan Bashedost (Kabul, Hazara) received 7-12 percent affiliation in three polls done May-July 2009. Bashedost is an eccentric populist, known for his occasionally irrational statements and the tent he terms his "office" across from Parliament. He distances himself from the political establishment and elites, while being perhaps the only candidate to garner significant votes across ethnic and class lines and the only one who can travel throughout Afghanistan without fear of his own security. Bashedost is known as the "anti" candidate -- anti-government, anti-corruption, anti-foreign forces, and whose popularity comes from the uneducated, poor, and youth due to their unhappiness with the endemic corruption in the Afghan government. His solid portion of the vote helps make a second round even more probable. End Summary.

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The Popular Populist  
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¶2. (C) A May 25 German-funded Konrad study estimated Bashedost will receive 12% of the vote, the U.S.-sponsored June INR study estimated 8%, while the early July ACSOR study showed 7.1% of the vote. (Note: in the last two studies, about 25% of the respondents either refused to respond, or said they were undecided.) In the 2005 parliamentary elections, Bashedost surprised many when he surpassed many well-known warlords and politicians to receive the third highest number of votes in Kabul province. Karzai's Palace Chief of Staff Mohammad Daudzai told us August 8 that he thinks Bashedost will get 9% of the vote, a number which is unlikely to grow or diminish relative to the fortunes of other candidates.

¶3. (SBU) Bashedost is an eccentric ethnic Hazara populist, spending most of his time in his tent office across the street from Parliament. His campaign statements often mention his rejection of foreign forces in Afghanistan, but he focuses much more of his attention on corruption in the Afghan government and the plight of the working poor. This issue has gained him his following among the lower income residents of Western Kabul in particular. Kabul University students recently told us his popularity comes from the uneducated, poor, and youth due to their unhappiness with the endemic corruption in the Afghan government. Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan party leader Abdul Hadi Arghandewal dismissed Bashedost as not a serious candidate, but said some "poor and ignorant Pashtuns" would support Bashedost despite the ethnic difference. Daudzai confirmed this, noting that disenfranchised Kabul day laborers, even Pashtuns, supported Bashedost despite his ethnic origins.

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Irrational?  
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¶4. (C) Think Tank Afghanistan's Center for Research and

Policy Studies Director Haroun Mir told us the political establishment considers Bashardost too irrational to treat seriously. He said Bashardost has "lost his mind," pointing to a recent televised interview where he used vulgar words, noting Afghanistan remains a highly conservative country. He also said Bashardost "has no agenda." A Kabul University Political Science Professor told us Bashardost would never be a national figure since he lacked the religious qualities most Afghans looked for in a president, noting a recent televised interview where Bashardost said "he does not want God's satisfaction, only the satisfaction of his own soul."

15. (C) A group of Law and Political Science Kabul University students told us that although they liked Bashardost's anti-corruption message initially, when they listened to his campaign statements in more detail, they realized he was "crazy." They said Bashardost stated that he would have the leader of any country that interfered in Afghan politics assassinated; this message did not resonate since the students noted that Afghans were sick of war. Female MP Fawziq Koofi (Badakhshan, Tajik) told us Bashardost is the "anti" candidate -- anti-government, anti-corruption, anti-foreign forces. She voiced concern that he had not yet said what he actually does support.

16. (C) Bashardost briefly served as Planning Minister in the 2002-2004 transitional government before his outspokenness cost him his job; specifically, he called for the abolishing of all non-governmental organizations in Afghanistan because they were corrupt. Lower House Speaker Yunus Qanooni (Tajik, Kabul) has occasionally had Bashardost removed from the Lower House chamber when he would not stop yelling accusations of

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corruption at other politicians in the room. Bashardost also marches out on his own accord after making his accusations. MP Mohammad Alem Saei (Uzbek, Takhar) told us that because no one took Bashardost seriously, no one harmed him. An unconfirmed but common story about Bashardost involves him getting a flat tire (he owns a Toyota Corolla, which he drives himself without security) in a Taliban-dominated region; the Taliban stopped him, but when they realized who he was, they patched his tire and sent him on his way.

17. (C) Bashardost lived and studied in France during the 1990s, where he reportedly received a PhD with high honors from the Sorbonne. Adding to his legend of having "nothing to lose" he lives at home with his parents, and gives away his MP salary to his staff. He speaks French and some English. Although the Embassy has met with Bashardost in the past, primarily in passing at the parliament, he has refused to meet with us this election season. His official platform notes "he does not have the support from any political leaders, Jihadi commanders, government officials nor foreign countries."

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Taking to the Road, Without Bodyguards  
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18. (C) Bashardost frequently tells the press he "does not fear visiting all of the tribes and people in Afghanistan," noting that he does not need bodyguards. He says other candidates use bodyguards and armored vehicles but since he has never killed any Taliban, they have no enmity towards him. Bashardost's campaign advisors told us he has visited the following primarily Northern and Eastern provinces: Balkh, Nangarhar, Kunar, Laghman, Paktya, Paktika, Bamyan, Baghlan, Kunduz, Kapisa, Parwan, Logar, Ghazni, Khost, Badakhshan, Takhar and Kabul. These provinces represent primarily Karzai and Mohaqqueq (now pro-Karzai) strong-holds in the 2004 elections, but also includes two Tajik and one traditionally Uzbek province.

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Willing to Form An Alliance?  
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19. (C) Votes for Bashardost are taken from both major candidates's bases, but especially Karzai's, making a second round more likely. Palace Chief of Staff Daudzai gave his analysis that Bashardost would not form a first-round alliance, but might work a deal with the candidate who supports him on policy issues. Kabul University Professors said Bashardost would not negotiate with President Karzai or Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, as his campaign hinges on being the "anti-establishment" ticket, and that Karzai and Abdullah represent traditional Afghan politics and horse-trading. MP Saeed said that candidates would want Bashardost's votes, and try to form an alliance with him, but would "never be able to control him" even if he did join their ticket.

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